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Turkey's Love Affair With Somalia

Blog Post by Guest Blogger for John Campbell

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Turkey and Somalia are the geopolitical realm's newest couple, and things are getting serious.

Turkey has unleashed a charm offensive in Africa, and Somalia specifically. After the last members of the al-Shebab terrorist group were chased out of Mogadishu in August 2011, [Ankara flooded the city with some five hundred development and aid workers](#). Turkish prime minister Erdogan was [the first non-African leader to enter the city limits of Mogadishu](#) since the country collapsed in 1991; Turkish Airlines was also [the first major carrier](#) to fly into Mogadishu in twenty years. Since then Turkey has given some U.S. \$51 million to Somalia. These overtures have stirred up serious emotions in the country.

What forms do this love affair take?

More than any other country, Turkey has taken on a deeply influential role in bringing Somalia's situation to international attention. In May 2012 Turkey hosted a United Nations conference on Somalia's transition process, after which Erdoğan explained: "[We have really struggled to make Somalia's voice heard.](#)" Turkey has been assiduous in its efforts in opening schools, improving public sanitation, repairing roads, and renovating the country's dilapidated airport. "[They are the sponsor we have been looking for the last twenty years. They are the Holy Grail for Somalia.](#)" A Somali national said.

Turkey's innovation is its on-the-ground engagement. Most countries operating in Somalia have headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. Turkey is in the thick of Mogadishu. This [smashed the wall that made Mogadishu a no-go zone](#). It was the best gift for the Somali people.

Turkey's friendship overtures also extend beyond Somalia into the rest of Africa. Their embassies and consulates have increased from twelve in 2009 to an [anticipated thirty-four by the end of 2012](#).

Turkey is also trying to leverage its 99 percent Muslim identity to show how it is uniquely positioned to be a regional and global leader. Somalia analyst Abdihakim Aynte notes that Erdoğan's 2011 Somalia visit reinforced this [theory](#).

Not everyone is impressed with Turkey's leader-via-Islam strategy, however. Some in Turkey believe aid to Mogadishu is intended to [woo Muslim voters](#) to the moderately Islamist AKP party. Somalia's al-Shebab openly ridiculed Turkey as "[a stooge of the West.](#)"

Paralleling developmental assistance, Turkey agreed to train peacekeeping troops in 2010. In February 2012, [Turkey was also poised to contribute capacity-building as well as material resources](#). This is a paradigm shift from previous, security-centric, approaches.

What will the implications of the Turkey and Somalia love affair be?

To Africa: while Somalia is reaping the rewards of international visibility and domestic security, other countries will also likely benefit from education and infrastructure development, and most importantly, increased trade relations.

To Somalia: Turkey's entrance appears to be a godsend. There is finally a genuinely devoted partner who is effective in catalyzing both peace and development. Further, Turkey's Muslim identity undermines anti-imperial, jihadi rhetoric that historically underwrote al-Shebab's terror logic.

To Turkey: Africa provides allies for international forums. It also represents a source of natural resources, and a new market for diversified trade and reduced dependency on Europe.

To the U.S.: Turkey's presence in Africa will likely be more beneficial than undercutting. Though at odds on certain points, Washington and Ankara hold broadly similar goals for antiterrorist initiatives, conflict resolution, and economic development on the continent.

Today, Turkey and Somalia are cozying up in the honeymoon period; whether their relationship will stand the test of time is yet to be seen.